

# Cinema, the City, and Manoel de Oliveira's Logic of Sensation

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## Film and Painting

Gilles Deleuze left an important theoretical legacy in the form of a conception of a cinema of the senses and his thoughts on the affective intersection between images and sounds, broadly understood as blocks of sensations and blocks of space-time.

The theme of the senses and the visual arts has had a strong impact on sensory documentary films on the works of renowned artists such as Alain Resnais's *Van Gogh* (1948) and *Le mystère Picasso/The Mystery of Picasso* (1956) by Henri-Georges Clouzot. These types of films are directly addressed to the problem of creating new aesthetic sensations, non-human affects and percepts (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994), in particular those related to films on painting and art works. From this perspective, a central question concerns how the filmmaker imagines the sensations of the painter and how the film expresses and supports those new sensations.

Within this line of inquiry, and before I explore Oliveira's film in more detail, I wish to briefly consider André Bazin's thoughts on film and painting, which are part of a longstanding debate on the quality and suitability of films on art in which film, with its automatic and unhuman techniques, was often seen as a betrayal of the spiritual, unique, and subjective efforts of the painter. In his most famous essay on the topic, "Painting and Cinema", Bazin (1967, p. 164–169) states that these types of films have educational and aesthetic value since they bring together high culture and popular culture.

Bazin highlights several problems that the "impure medium" of cinema encounters and that form the foundation of his criticism: 1) film's form as a horizontal montage that disturbs the extensive, in-depth perspective of the painting's 'time'; 2) an editing technique that fragments and creates new synthesis, new connections; 3) black and white images that betray the features of the painting and cinema's general inability to be true to colour; and 4) the problem of space, the extent to which the frame of a painting, its canvas, delineates a pictorial space that is destroyed by the film screen. In short, according to Bazin, the representation of time, space, and colour is problematic in film, due to its very nature.

Following the typical Bazinian conceptual framework, Angela Dalle Vacche observes that “[c]olor in painting is geological and centripetal, hence even more alien to the centrifugal nature of film and its screen” (1996, p. 306). Indeed, film, with its centrifugal screen, changes the nature of the other art form, which is characterized by its centripetal canvas; film imposes its spatiotemporal qualities on any art form it portrays. As for the transition from the painted canvas to moving images, the Bazinian perspective clearly highlights the *dominant* and *transformative* nature of film in relation to painting. Even so, with this problematic relation in mind, at the end of his essay Bazin argues that the encounter between the two art forms can create a “newborn aesthetic creature, fruit of the union of painting and cinema”, and that films such as Alain Resnais’s *Van Gogh* and Pierre Kast’s *Goya, Disasters of War* “are works in their own right. They are their own justification” (Bazin, 1967, p. 168).

Rather than comparing the differences between the two art forms (film and painting), including their ontological differences, I wish to pursue this affirmative line of thought – the idea that a new creature is born in films about art. Indeed, *The Artist and the City* reinvigorates this longstanding debate by introducing new problems. The first is the question of its genre. How ought we to classify *The Artist and the City*? As a documentary film it aims to depict the work of a watercolorist, Antonio Cruz, and as a city symphony film it aims to portray a day in the life of a modern city, Porto, from dawn to dusk. The film belongs to both genres, although not in a conventional way. By reconceiving these genres, the film provides us with a new aesthetic interpretation from each perspective, which I will explore below.

## The City Symphony

Film history has shown that movies have always had a special connection to the city. They have created new city views and celebrated iconic skylines, establishing the city as the main character of many films. When thinking about the relationship between cinema and the city, many ideas come to mind. We have all had the experience of visiting a new city for the first time and in a sense “remembering” it from a movie we’ve seen. In

other cases, we feel that we already know a city, even though we've never been there, simply because we've seen it on screen. This phenomenon had already been experienced in the context of paintings, however: David B. Clarke quotes Jean Baudrillard's comparison of the connection between certain European cities and Italian or Dutch paintings and the connection between American cities and film (1997, p. 1). It seems that the modern city is inseparable from the screenscape, from the way it is filmed and represented by cinema – as if the city itself emerged out of movies.

Nevertheless, the cinematic city is far from being a truthful representation of the “real” city. Paraphrasing Paul Klee's famous aphorism – art's purpose is “[n]ot to render the visible, but to render visible” (1985, p. 34) – film likewise seems not to render the visible, but to render visible. However, by making its subject visible and perceptible, an image is not thereby limited to what is there to be represented, nor is it reduced to the present dimension of seeing it.

Moving images are not limited to showing reality as it is because their connection and editing techniques transcend simple representation: cinema is driven by sensations, not representation. After all, cinema has changed the way we perceive reality: it gives us new perspectives on reality, new points of view, that challenge our natural perception of the world.

In a sense, the cinematic city was born in 1895 with the Lumière brothers. One of the first movies ever publically screened was *Place des Cordeliers*, which depicts a minute in the life of the famous French square. It is interesting to note that the specific urban public space is itself a place of transit: we witness this through the intense movement of its elements, from public transportation to several urban activities.

In the 1920s, the city itself became the main character of a popular genre: the city symphony. Such is the case in *Manhattan* (1921) and *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927), movies that aimed to provide scopophilic experiences, portraying the city from the outside, as an object of pleasure and amazement.

This close link between cinema and the city was noted by Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin, mostly because, as Graeme Gilloch argues, cinema “is able to capture the flux and movement of the urban environment, to record the spontaneous and the ephemeral” (1996, p. 18).

Yet the popularity of the genre did not make it immune to philosophical criticism. Some criticized it, including Kracauer and Benjamin, claiming that the films offered a superficial and formalist image of the life of the city, an exterior portrait of what the modern city looked like, as the expression of new sensations, new rhythms, but also of the new forms of alienation that were so typical of modern urban life. For Kracauer (1995), for example, the attraction that cinema has always had to the city and street life is grounded in their common nature: both are expressions of transience and ephemerality.

Consider, for example, Kracauer's (1995, p. 318) criticism of Walter Ruttmann's most acclaimed city symphony: "But does it [*Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*] convey the reality of Berlin? No: it is just as blind to reality as any other feature film (...) Ruttmann leaves the thousands of details unconnected, one next to the other, inserting at most some arbitrarily conceived transitions that are meaningless." Kracauer reproaches *Berlin* for its superficial portrait of an "ornamented" life, for its fragmented edited sequences without meaningful direction, since its formalist techniques (the use of eccentric angles, camera movements and speeds, and even the self-consciousness of the editing work) prevail over everything else. He reproaches Ruttmann's film, in particular, for its lack of soul.

The superficiality and formalism of these attempts were therefore not received without criticism, as a manifestation of a *deeper* quotidian phenomenon to be discovered. But the inner relationship between the city and cinema has been met not only with criticism but also with more constructive reactions. As Nélio da Conceição observes, "technology increased an element which is fundamental in Benjamin's relationship with the city: physiognomy and, implicitly, the idea of decipherment" (2018, p. 304). The filmmaker shares the role of a Benjaminian physiognomist, especially when understanding, examining and expressing a paradoxical realities with a critical gaze, at the time both superficial and profound.

Thus, although we might view these movies as poems or tributes to large, modern cities, the life of the city has not always been represented truthfully. With that said, however, how *can* film provide a truthful representation of the city?

As Giuliana Bruno (2002, p. 56) has argued, movement is common to both cities and movies. In each filmic experience, the viewer follows an imaginary path, one designed by the film's montage sequences. With Dziga Vertov, for example, moving images became an art form that created its own city, a mental and imaginary space that Kuleshov called a "creative geography". The idea of a path and of walking, together with the sensorial affects and percepts that constitute the nervous system, allows us to understand the great similarity between walking down a city boulevard and watching a film: both experiences are based on the idea of a fragmented, discontinued and shocking point of view on reality itself.

If fragmentation and shock are synonymous with modernity, how can art express that experience? Is this fragmentary experience partially or entirely reconfigured by the 'spectatorial movement' of the *flâneur*, the moviegoer or the filmmaker? Can we really say that we come to know a city better by seeing it on screen? What does the (superficial) screen show us on a deeper level? In the following, via a film analysis of Oliveira's *The Artist and the City*, I will attempt to look beyond the limits of abstract and formalist city symphonies for an alternative to the above criticism.

## **The Artist and the City: A Film Analysis**

The Portuguese filmmaker Manoel de Oliveira has always expressed his own concerns about these questions, at least in his first movies, in a straight dialogue with the contemporary European avant-garde. For Iván Villarrea Álvarez, *The Artist and the City* is the last film in a single cinematic composition that he calls a "modernist trilogy about everyday life and the banks of the Douro river" (2015, p. 156), a trilogy that begins with the short documentary *Douro, Faina Fluvial/Labor on the Douro River* (1931), followed by the fictional film *Aniki Bóbo* (1942).

The cinematic qualities of the city of Porto are the main characters of Oliveira's first three movies, along with the city's iconic historical landscapes, its lively crowds sharing public and modern spaces, and the anonymous human beings who live, move around and work there.

This trilogy has shaped our collective imagination regarding the city of Porto in all its photogenic qualities. Interestingly, it begins with a film that in many ways replicates the model of the city symphony, for example by showing the chaotic and disorienting rhythms of the new experience of a modern city and of urban life. In this sense, Oliveira can be regarded as a formalist: he reveals his own cinematic visions by emphasising the film's formal elements, such as the editing work. He did not want to create a film that gave the illusion of not having been created or manipulated, as if it were reality itself.

The trilogy of films ends with *The Artist and the City*, a short poetic documentary that explores an imagined city of Porto through the complex relationships between the individual and the collective, the fragmented and the whole, painting and film itself. My aim here is to question the relationship between the artistic practice of moving images and the experience of the modern city towards a logic of sensation. This objective is not limited to the film's aesthetic qualities, for I also aim to analyse its social, economic, and political structure, just as Kracauer claimed (1995, p. 318). Could *The Artist and the City* be the soul that was lacking in other city symphony films? Does it give us an innovative perspective on its social, economic, and political structure?

In a way, as mentioned above, *The Artist and the City* revisits many of the subjects presented in both *Labor on the Douro River* and *Aniki Bóbó*, and it seems at first to recover the city symphony genre in the sense that it portrays a conventional working day in a big, modern city. In this case, the journey is that of a painter, the watercolour artist António Cruz, who takes the viewer on a tour of his favourite city landmarks while painting them.

The film is not limited to depicting a painter at work, however. As a film, it creates a particular space and a particular time for that cinematic experience. What I wish to explore here is how the portrait of a modern city is assembled in a montage of fragments and the differences between painting and film. *The Artist and the City* was not only Oliveira's first colour film, exploring the full sensorial potential of polychrome, but also a film about the powerful forces of the moving image.

At the age of forty-eight, Oliveira directed his first colour film – colour being the only reason offered in explanation of his choice to

portray this artist in particular, a watercolourist. On the one hand, we might say that the film explores contemplative ‘representation’ and the transition from the painter’s urban watercolours to the filmic image of the urban landscape. On the other, however, the filmmaker was aware of the enormous responsibility of his ingenuity, since a comparison would doubtless be made between his cinematography and the canvas.

António Cruz and the city, Porto, are the film’s two protagonists. According to André Bazin (1957, p. 48), this “film d’art” is a “poetic documentary about the city of Porto.”<sup>1</sup> The film portrays the modern mundanity that surrounds the artistic work, showing the painter surrounded by anonymous crowds snooping at his work, but also by the city’s soundscapes.

But *The Painter and the City* is more than a poetic documentary about a city; it is more than a short documentary on an artist and his work. It is not a biopic about a watercolourist – we are not introduced to the painter’s life and work, to his techniques and influences, or to his importance to the Portuguese art world. In the end, we learn nothing about António Cruz himself.

Whereas *Labor on the Douro* was clearly inspired by Ruttmann’s film and structured by different film editing techniques, *The Painter* is quite different, as if the filmmaker were rejecting his earlier work as overly centred on editing methods. Whereas classical city symphonies move from the periphery towards the city center, like the journey taken by a commuter, *The Painter* moves from the artist’s studio to the outdoors, a visual metaphor for the worldview we are about to experience, but also a literal movement from painting to film.

This first movement gives us the illusion that we are about to see the artist immersed in his inspiration, the city of Porto. And at first, we are not deceived. Soon, however, after the first few minutes, the film reveals itself as having other purposes. We do not leave with the artist; we leave his studio through one of his works, through a slow panoramic movement from the door to one of the paintings, precisely a painting of a steam train (a symbol for cinema itself), entering into a cinematically imagined other place, other than the portrayed city of Porto (Figs. 1–4).

1 Author’s translation.



**Figs. 1-4**  
Screenshots from *The Painter and the City*  
© Manoel de Oliveira

The next shots are of trains, crossing bridges or arriving at São Bento train station, a clear reference to the Lumière brothers. Here, we can see that Oliveira is fully aware that cinema has radically changed the way we view the urban space. As Oliveira continues with this tribute, *looking back* into cinema's history but also to the city's historical landmarks, he is also *looking forward* by creating a new image of a modern, dynamic, fragmented city. This opposition is very important to understanding the structure of the film. Even if we recognize a time and a place (1950s Porto), the film has another subject: a sensorial aesthetics that reveals the passages between art forms, between different techniques. The film's objectivity – and indeed its music – sometimes mimics the canvas's point of view, thus perpetuating the classical hierarchy between spaces: sacred and profane, urban and rural, etc.), although it generally moves beyond imitation by creating new points of view, framing the city in a fragmented way and creating a cinematic space that is unsettled and disconnected, with slow and disorienting vertical camera movements that depart from the human point of view.

Spatiotemporal fragmentation follows the contemplative gaze of modernity, confronting the viewer with the painting's presentness, emphasised by Lessing's idea of the "pregnant moment". Time is a disruptive element in the relationship between painting and film. It is in terms of time that, in a 1989 interview, Manoel de Oliveira explained how the film was conceived: "I made *The Painter* in opposition to *Labor on the Douro River*. If *Douro* is a film of montage, *The Painter* is a film of ecstasies. We were ecstatic with those images, for a long period of time. Within *The Painter and the City* I have discovered that time is a rather important element. I mean, there is colour, there is framing, there is the shot object, but there is, most of all, time. I have discovered that a fast image has an effect, but when the image persists, then it gains another form" (1989, p. 56).<sup>2</sup>

The avant-garde use of a temporal dimension that has freed itself from movement (against a cinema of montage), and the intersections between still and moving images and sounds – the simplicity of the city's noises (trains, trams, ...), the intermittent use of an extradiegetic soundtrack and the absence of traditional voiceover, which could contextualize the film or introduce the main character (the film also has no intertitles) – will be important in analysing how cinema becomes a technique that is closer to art than a neutral mechanical reproduction of reality. Oliveira also inserts the appropriate sounds for some of the elements portrayed in the paintings, such as the noise of a train passing or the sound of church bells. Sound plays a specific role in the film, shifting between religious music by Luis de Sousa Rodrigues, a madrigal choir, and the city's own soundscapes. This cinematic mode of thinking and feeling explores the ontological connections between different media and the sensual qualities of the compound of affects and percepts.

The city's social space is inhabited by an anonymous crowd, circulating in a homogeneous space, an anonymity and homogeneity that is only disturbed by art in the figure of the painter, who stands out from the crowd, drawing attention to himself as an outsider to the city's anonymous rhythm and movements. The painter's presence interrupts

2 Author's translation.

the quotidian and distracts passersby from their usual routines, thus fragmenting the homogeneous urban space. At one point in the film, a police officer approaches to disperse the crowd.

But Oliveira takes advantage of editing techniques to insert his own vision of Portuguese society at that point in time, expressing his own social and political concerns about the extra-cinematic city and society. This is exemplified in a poetic sequence in which Oliveira alternates fixed shots of flowering trees with fixed shots of modernist buildings, thus using the concepts of spring and modernism as metaphors for the awakening of a new society (Figs. 5–8):



**Figs. 5–8**  
Screenshots from *The Painter and the City*  
© Manoel de Oliveira

It is also exemplified in a sequence in which the crowd “follows” directions given by mute statues, moving to the right and to the left, unquestioningly (Figs. 9–10). In these examples, we see Oliveira’s notorious interest in the anonymous human beings who inhabit, work in and move through the city.

**FIGs. 9–10**  
Screenshots from *The Painter and the City*  
© Manoel de Oliveira



The filmmaker inserts his own vision in a movement from images to ideas. Far from being empty and artificial, Oliveira’s formalism is full of meaning, directing us to notice and to think about the visual contradictions of modern society (also strengthening this perspective are shots of poverty and of people living in sheds at the periphery of the historical city center).

*The Artist and the City* is also an experimental art documentary, and this aspect is important when it comes to blocking the criticisms levied against city symphonies’ ostensibly superficial and formalist features, adding new layers of interpretation. In this respect, it is also worth noting the film’s color palette: its sunny yellows, misty greys, and reds and oranges of the afternoon. The watercolor technique aims to render its subjects visible, capturing their impreciseness and fuzziness rather than copying reality. At first sight, this conjugation may seem anachronistic; as Bernardo Pinto de Almeida argues (2015), watercolor was an artistic resistance to modernism itself and its transformations, whereas cinema was the best expression of a modernist demand. Oliveira is able to bring both watercolor and cinema together as a study on light. Film is the perfect medium for reproducing watercolors since both depend on the suspended, almost ghostly, materiality of light, fog, and mist: a “luminous film.”

## The Spiritual Automaton: Images and Ideas

It is with regard to the film's temporal dimension that Oliveira distinguishes himself. The filmmaker argues that there was a great difference between *Labor on the Douro River* and *The Painter and the City*, a film in which he wanted to use time in a very different way: instead of relying on montage sequences, in *The Painter* he wanted to extend the duration of each shot to create an unconventional perception of time, almost more than necessary, turning a distracting experience into a possibly contemplative one. In this way, the persistence of the shot, its duration distended more than is "narratively" necessary, becomes the spirit of the spectator. More than giving fleeting and rapid impressions, the film *materializes* new, persisting sensations. In a footnote to the second volume on cinema, *The Time-Image*, Deleuze appeals to Cézanne's idea of a "materialized sensation", saying that "a film is not understood as offering or producing sensations for the viewer, but as 'materializing them,' achieving a tectonics of sensation" (2008, p. 316 n.44).

This "new aesthetic creature" thus creates a strange aesthetic experience, half contemplation and concentration, half shock and distraction. This awkward combination is not located temporally in the present, however, mainly because of the *dominant* and *transformative* role of film in relation to painting.

Of course, painting's simulation of eternity (its presentness) creates a stronger experience that concentrates the viewer's attention, which seems to be the exact opposite of the distraction produced by moving images. This new creature contradicts the temporal tension between the painting's eternity and the film's ephemeral character: Oliveira stretches the duration of certain shots to counteract the ways in which film (with its characteristic editing techniques) distracts us. Time endures in *The Painter and the City*.

Together with the idea of cinematic time, this perspective challenges our natural approach to 'motionless' artistic images, especially our ordinary expected understanding of the present moment: the actual chronological sequence of present moments according to what is represented [immobile image = eternal present]. The general use of the

parallel montage (of the variable present) in classical cinema highlights this idea. Although this overemphasis on the eternal present of the “now” can give us a certain indirect image *of* time, it is an intra-temporal image that exists *in* time and that results from a natural and unconscious understanding of the continuous contraction of the past and the future [past presents ← living present → future present].

As noted above, Manoel de Oliveira’s *The Painter and the City* goes beyond the canvas’s point of view by creating new perspectives that from the human point of view, for example by framing the city in a fragmented way, thus creating a cinematic space that is unsettled and disconnected, with slow and disorienting vertical camera movements.

This brings us to one last Deleuzian concept that I wish to mention, if only briefly, because it sums up what is in question here: the concept of a “spiritual automaton.”<sup>3</sup> Grounded in Spinoza’s philosophy, the concept of a spiritual automaton plays a central role in Deleuze’s philosophy of film since it synthesizes his idea that cinema thinks and feels by itself: “We can no longer say ‘I see, I hear’, but I FEEL, ‘totally physiological sensation’. And it is the set of harmonics acting on the cortex which gives rise to thought, the cinematographic I THINK: the whole as subject” (Deleuze, 2008, p. 158). Claire Colebrook (2001, p. 29), for example, observes that “[o]nly with cinema can we think of a mode of ‘seeing’ that is not attached to the human eye. Cinema, then, offers something like a ‘percept’: a reception of data that is not located in a subject.” As Richard Rushton argues, “[w]hile at the cinema, we are able to encounter that which is genuinely *new*” (2012, p. 11).

Deleuze describes film as a new experience, as a possible field for creating new percepts and new affects, the elements that constitute his logic of sensation. Although he does not conceptualize the role of the viewer, he defines the creation of a new subjectivity that is particular to the cinematic experience, one that is not reducible to psychological analysis (the question of the gaze, voyeurism, identification, empathy, etc.) but that centres on new ways of thinking and feeling, which he identifies with the film itself. Concerning the visual arts in general, Deleuze was not interested in studying movement as the simple dislocation of moving

3 For a better understanding of this concept’s philosophical origins, see Viegas 2014.

bodies, as in the spatial movement from point A to point B, or cinematic photograms as immobile images to which abstract movement is added by the mechanical and rhythmic sequencing of still images. Instead, he was interested in the inception of movement into spirit, which is precisely what Oliveira attempted to achieve. Thus, the essence of moving images can be better described by their capacity to create a shock in thinking, to directly touch our nervous system, and less so by their narrative and imaginative communication skills.

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